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Progress Toward Equity in Rural Transportation: An Update on SAFETEA-LU

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Progress Toward Equity in Rural Transportation: An Update on SAFETEA-LU

Rural residents frequently cite the lack of transportation as one of their most difficult problems. In 1999, RTC: Rural researchers described a major cause of this situation – the historical inequity between urban and rural public transportation funding (Seekins, Spas, & Hubbard, 1999). At that time, the projected 2003 budget for the Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century (TEA-21) allotted 94.5% of funds to subsidize public transportation for the 75% of U.S. citizens living in urban areas, and only 6% to support transportation for the 25% of U.S. citizens living in rural areas (see Table 1).

While inequities remain, Congressional passage of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act - A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) substantially improved public transportation funding for both rural areas and for people with disabilities. Table 1 shows that between 2003 and 2006, rural transportation funding increased by more than half – to 11% of the transportation budget.

In 1998, TEA-21 authorized three major programs directly affecting people with disabilities. Section 5307 supports urban mass transportation systems, Section 5311 supports rural transportation programs, and Section 5310 supports programs providing transportation to elderly individuals and persons with disabilities, regardless of location.

SAFETEA-LU continued these programs and initiated three important new programs affecting people with disabilities living in rural areas: the New Freedom transportation program (Section 5317), the Growing States Program (Section 5340), and the Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Program (Section 5311c).

The New Freedom program (Section 5317) is designed to spark innovation in and expansion of transportation services for people with disabilities. Funds are allocated to states, with 60% going to large urban areas, 20% to small urban areas, and 20% to rural areas. States must use the funds to explore new ways to meet the transportation needs of people with disabilities, but may not use them to supplement funding for their other transportation programs.

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The Growing States Program (Section 5340) distributes funds to urban and rural areas based on a formula for rapidly growing areas. The Indian Reservation Program (5311c) is part of the regular 5311 appropriation, but recognizes that reservations have significant public transportation needs.

Table 1. Federal TEA-21 and projected SAFETEA-LU funding for selected public transportation programs affecting people with disabilities (figures in millions of dollars)

| Program | TEA-21 | SAFETEA-LU | | | |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | FY'03 | FY'06 | FY'07 | FY'08 | FY'09 |
| Urban | | | | | |
| Section 5307 (urbanized & forumula) | \$3,596 | \$3,467 | \$3,606 | \$3,911 | \$4,160 |
| Section 5340 (growing/ high density states) | | \$324 | \$341 | \$370 | \$392 |
| Percent of funding | 94% | 89% | 89% | 89% | 89% |
| Rural | | | | | |
| Section 5311 | \$241 | \$388 | \$404 | \$438 | \$465 |
| Section 5340 (growing/ high density states) | | \$60 | \$63 | \$68 | \$73 |
| Percent of funding | 6% | 11% | 11% | 11% | 11% |
| Totals | \$3,837 | \$4,239 | \$4,414 | \$4,787 | \$5,090 |
| Section 5310 (capital assistance for elderly & people with disabilities) | \$90 | \$112 | \$117 | \$127 | \$136 |
| Section 5317 (New Freedom) | | \$78 | \$81 | \$88 | \$93 |

Note: Projected Section 5340 urban and rural allocations use FY 2006 as a base year. Many think that federal highway funding has a rural bias, but General Accountability Office data (GAO-01-836R FHF) show it is almost exactly proportional to miles of roadway, with a slight urban bias.

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Rural disability advocates can now work to ensure that this new funding is used wisely, in ways that justify the taxpayers' investment. Researchers need to analyze the impact of these programs, identify those innovative approaches that provide effective transportation services, and explore areas that need improvement.

References

General Accountability Office. (July 16, 2001). Federal Highway Funding by Program and Type of Roadway, With Related Safety Data (GAO-01-836R). Washington, DC: GAO.

P.L. 109-59: Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act - A Legacy for Users, 23 USC § 502. (2005).

Seekins, T., Spas, D., & Hubbard, M. (1999). Inequities in rural transportation. (Factsheet). Missoula, MT: The University of Montana, Montana University Affiliated Rural Institute on Disabilities.

P.L. 105-178:Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century, 23 USC §101. (1998).

Resources

Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living: <http://www.april-rural.org>

Community Transportation Association of America: <http://www.CTAA.org>

Easter Seals Project Action: <http://projectaction.easterseals.com>

United We Ride: <http://www.unitedweride.gov>

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